

TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST/OCT. 18, 2020

Call to Worship/Psalm 99 (NRSV)

The LORD is king; let the peoples tremble!

He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!

The LORD is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples.

Let them praise your great and awesome name. Holy is he!

Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity;

you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.

Extol the LORD our God; worship at his footstool. Holy is he!

Moses and Aaron were among his priests,

Samuel also was among those who called on his name.

They cried to the LORD, and he answered them.

He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud;

they kept his decrees, and the statutes that he gave them.

O LORD our God, you answered them;

you were a forgiving God to them,

but an avenger of their wrongdoings.

Extol the LORD our God, and worship at his holy mountain;

for the LORD our God is holy.

Centering Music *Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing* Jackie Livesay

Opening Prayer

Awesome and majestic God, your creative power, your glory and holiness were experienced by Moses and your people as pillars of cloud and fire guiding them to freedom. They believed that no one could see your face and live. How blessed therefore are we, for you have revealed your face to us in Jesus—the human face of your love. You also equip us for our journey through life and beyond, by breathing new and everlasting life into our very beings, through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Our ancestors in faith knew that they were your people because of your presence in their lives through the holy covenant established with them at Mt. Sinai. We praise and adore you, O God, for choosing to share your Word with us in Jesus, redeeming us through the cross, and uniting us in love as a sisters and brothers. May this time of worship and the service of our lives reveal our thanksgiving and our wonder that you should so care for us. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Scripture Lesson/Exodus 33:12-23 (NRSV)

¹²Moses said to the LORD, “See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people’; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ ¹³Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.”

¹⁴He said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

¹⁵And he said to him, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. ¹⁶For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.”

¹⁷The LORD said to Moses, “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.”

¹⁸Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.”

¹⁹And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The LORD’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ²⁰But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” ²¹And the LORD continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; ²²and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; ²³then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

Message/Moses Must Be from Missouri

There was once a boy who woke up one warm summer morning who decided that he wanted to go on a search for God. After getting dressed, he bounded down the stairs to the kitchen. Following a modest breakfast, the boy began packing a lunch—including a grape Nehi, a bologna sandwich, and some chips. Curious as to what her son was up to given that he was packing a lunch and that it wasn’t a school day, the mother inquired: What are you planning to do? The boy said, “Mom, I want to go out and search for God.” Now his mom didn’t want to squash her son’s curiosity about finding God. In a way she was very pleased that he would even be thinking about such a quest. So, she told him to be careful as the screen door closed behind him.

Thinking that God might just be there, the boy walked several blocks to a wooded park. There he rollicked on the playground with some of the other children who were delighting in the summer sun. After a while, he thought to himself, “maybe I should get going, I’ll never find God if I stay here and keep playing.” It was about lunchtime and the boy was feeling a bit hungry. Moving to the bench where he had put his lunch, he encountered an elderly woman who had come out to get some fresh air and enjoy the weather. Hopping up on the end of the bench, the

boy retrieved his lunch and began opening it. He looked over toward the woman on the opposite end of the bench who had also planned ahead and was taking some cookies out of a bag for a snack. Before too long, the boy and the elderly woman had struck up a conversation and began sharing what they both had brought for lunch. The boy had never tasted such delicious cookies! After eating, they continued their conversation. About midafternoon, the woman looked at her watch and told him that it was probably best if she made her way back to her small apartment. The boy, too, thought of his own mother worrying about him and decided to start the journey home. They smiled and took leave from each other.

Upon arriving back at her apartment, the elderly woman ran into her grown son who had stopped by to check on her. "Well, mom" he queried, "what have you been up to today." "Oh," she said, "I went out this morning to look for God." His curiosity piqued, her son asked, "Well, did you find him?" to which the woman replied, "Yes, although he was a bit younger than I thought he'd be."

As the boy entered his house, his mother, curiously asked him, "Were you successful in your quest? Did you find God?" To which the boy responded, "Yes, although she's a little older than I thought she'd be."

In our Scripture lesson for this morning from the Book of Exodus, God has just instructed Moses to leave his encampment at Mt. Sinai and lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. Still smarting from the golden calf debacle, though, Moses isn't ready to budge. He pleads with God, "Show me your ways." "Show me your glory." And this is how we know that Moses must have been from Missouri; he must have come from the "show-me state."

What Moses wants is certainty — specific knowledge about God's plans. Moses desires for God to show him what's coming, what's waiting down the pike. Inquiring minds want to know! But, instead of a crystal-clear vision of the future, what Moses gets, however, is something different. God responds enigmatically, refusing to directly answer Moses' plea. God says, "I know you by name." In the Exodus story, the Israelites' disastrous attempt to "know" God, to render God in a way they can see, smell, touch, and control—in the form of the golden calf—has

almost destroyed them. Moses is disgusted by their distrust of God who had already done so much. In that incident, the people were already breaking the covenant even as Moses was still receiving it from God up on the mountain. But he, too, finds himself hungry for more concrete knowledge of God: "If I have found favor in your sight," he prays, "show me your ways, so that I may know you." Reveal your plan, he begs God. Your blueprint, your big picture. Hand over your GPS; I'd like to know where I'll end up if I follow you.

I think most of us can sympathize with Moses. I've prayed Moses' prayer many times. I've wanted God to write boldly in the sky to know which direction to go when at a crossroads. Sometimes it seems that in those moments, God is especially silent. I have bargained with God to tell me at least something. Give me a hint, offer me a clue, a nod. I've found myself almost begging for a sense of presence and direction.

In the wisdom writings of the Old Testament, we encounter the frustrated and grieving Job desperately seeking out God, longing for God's presence in order to confront God about all that he has been through (23:3-9). Pines Job:

*Oh, that I knew where I might find him,
that I might come even to his dwelling!
I would lay my case before him,
and fill my mouth with arguments.
I would learn what he would answer me,
and understand what he would say to me.
Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?
No; but he would give heed to me.
There an upright person could reason with him,
and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.
"If I go forward, he is not there;
or backward, I cannot perceive him;
on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;
I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.*

The heavy burden of life's questions and ambiguities lead Job to beg for God to reveal Godself. In this hope-shaking and potentially faith-shattering moment, Job

desires an audience with God. I don't understand. I feel empty and afraid. I don't know what to do. I don't know what the future holds. Show me something.

Just as Job looks high and low for some inkling of God's presence, Moses finds himself desiring to catch a glimpse of God behind the veil of mystery. In our story for this morning, God dodges Moses' request, refusing to give Moses the specific knowledge he craves. God promises instead, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." Unlike Job, however, Moses already had many direct encounters with God. Who can forget Moses stepping away from his flock of sheep to give his attention to the bush that was aflame but not consumed, hearing God's voice calling from the bush for Moses to go back to Egypt and release the people from bondage? How can we not remember Moses seeing the power of God expressed in the plagues that struck Egypt and the piling up of the waters through which they crossed on their quest for freedom? What about the pillars of fire by night and cloud by day—revealing God's presence with them, guiding them ever onward? What about the quail that fell daily to feed them, the manna springing forth from the earth to sustain them, and the water drawn from a rock at the striking of Moses' staff?

Is Moses satisfied with God's puzzling response? No. With a cheeky boldness I love, he ventures, "Show me your glory." If you're not going to satisfy me intellectually, then dazzle me emotionally. Overwhelm my senses with your fullness, your essence, your radiant, unmediated self. *Then* I will know you're with me. Then I'll be ready to journey on. I've prayed this reckless prayer of Moses', too. "Show up!" I've dared God in times of fear and confusion. "Stop being so mysterious and elusive. I want to *see* you, no matter what the cost!"

Moses' prayers and ours aren't exactly wrong. I think we please God when we desire to know God more deeply. What's wrong is the fear-based assumption that our well-being depends on how well we know God. God tells Moses. "*I know you* by name." The bottom line is, we can't bear to know God in God's fullness, and that's okay. Our security lies in God's perfect and total knowledge of us — not in our patchy comprehension of God.

We sometimes forget the power of names. For example, at the very beginning of the Exodus saga, we encounter Moses grasping for excuses to not carry out the assignment that God had for him. Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? What if the people don't believe me or listen to me? They don't know me, so how can they trust me. I am not an eloquent speaker. In this initial conversation at the burning bush, it is Moses who asks for the divine name, with God's response being something that, and quite appropriately so, is almost impossible to translate from the Hebrew or get an kind of handle on. God's response to this is "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be." You see, to know someone's name is to have a degree of control over that person. Without names, a relationship is limited to the impersonal. But it feels quite different to have a conversation with someone when we can use their given name or even their nickname.

When we go about the business of naming our children, we often chose names that reflect our heritage, and convey our hopes for each child. In some cultures, the task of naming babies goes not to the expectant parents, but to older generations who better understand the family's history and legacy. So, if we follow this logic, if God knows us by name, then God knows our story, our heritage, our beginning, and our end. If God knows us by name, God knows the very core of each of us.

I love the tenderness with which God responds to Moses' zealous desire to see God's glory. "You cannot see my face, for no one can see me and live, but I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

Living in the thirteenth century, St. Francis of Assisi believed, as did many people of his time, that clefts and crevices in rocks, even all the way in Europe, were created at that moment on Good Friday when, just as Jesus died, earthquakes rocked the land. Additionally, Medieval theologians and artists viewed Jesus' wounds as clefts in the rock in which we hide ourselves.

Theologians have puzzled over God's "backside" for decades. I don't have any answers to the anthropomorphic mystery, but in a more symbolic sense, I think

Moses' experience rings true to life. We have no ability to grasp the fullness of God, and so we live, however uneasily, with the necessity of mystery. God reminds Moses, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." However, much we might try to pin God down, God will elude us because God is God, sovereign and Other. God will elude us because God knows what kind of damage we'd wreak with certitude. God often eludes us for our own protection.

But God doesn't leave us without consolation. God covers us with the divine hand and allows us bearable glimpses of heavenly glory. Hints, intimations, traces. Like the wake of a ship on the sea, like the gorgeous afterglow of the setting sun, God reveals God's glory in retrospect. Often, it's when we look back that we see God's hand, the sure pattern of God's movements across the years, the circumstances, the arrivals, and departures of our lives.

Moses' request to see God's glory reminds us of John 14 where Philip asks Jesus, "Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus then did show all of them God's glory – the cross. Martin Luther suggested that in the cross, God showed us all the glory of God we could bear – calling it "God's hidden backside."

Having faced transitions over and over again in my life, I know how natural it is to crave certainty. Like Moses, we want to *know*. But this week's reading suggests that God understands something much more elemental about our hearts: what we really want is to *be known*.

"Everybody" probably won't know our names in this lifetime. But God will. God does. God knows each of us by name, and God's perfect knowledge — not ours — is enough.

Prayers of the People

In quieter times, God of peace, as in the busyness of our most hectic days, you hear the true prayers of not just what we say, but also what we do and who we are. Hear us as we join our hearts in unity to pray for your church. May we be

united in your truth, committed in your love, and sanctified by your grace, that with one heart and one voice we might proclaim your gospel in word and deed, praising you for your abiding presence in our midst as a community of faith.

We pray for our fellow creatures, this world which you lovingly made, and the people of earth with all their diversity and commonality. We lift to you those in our world who weep, and those who cause their weeping; those without food, clothing, shelter, or a means of sustaining life with the dignity of one whom you have created. We pray for those who distort the good news of the gospel, who make gods out of things, out of themselves, out of their systems, institutions or structures...and who find it all so hollow and empty.

We pray for those who live without meaning and hope, who live as objects of the whims of others, and those who live in broken families, broken communities, and a broken world. Lead your church, we pray, toward a new vision of our mission to them in Christ—the vision of shalom—both those who are afar off in other lands, but also here, where we see them face to face.

Tender and compassionate friend, give us the assurance that you are here among us this day. Enable us with your guidance to be your church and to do your will in our common life together. Pour out your Spirit on those who are suffering, especially as we lift to you our own needs and the needs of those whose lives are closely linked with our own, and those whom we name now in the silence of our hearts _____.

Bless us to follow in the paths of those saints who have gone before us in faith, whose steps were taken in the sure and certain comfort of your presence, that we may faithfully glorify you now, in your church and your world, forever. For these prayers we offer in the name and spirit of Jesus our Lord, who taught us to pray with one voice:

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Sending Music

Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me

Jackie Livesay

Commission/Blessing

The late Archbishop of El Salvador, Oscar Romero: “When we leave worship, we ought to go out the way Moses descended Mt. Sinai—with his face shining; with his heart brave and strong to face the world’s difficulties.”

Go now as those who have found favor in the sight of God.

Be imitators of Jesus Christ and an example to all of the life of faith.

To the world in which you live, give your love and service,
and to God, give all that you are and all that you shall be.

And may the glory of God’s goodness be revealed to you;

May the grace and peace of Jesus Christ take root in you;

And may the inspiration of the Holy Spirit fill you with joy.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen.